

Doctors, nurses often use holistic medicine for themselves

August 19 2011, By Milly Dawson



U.S. health care workers, especially doctors and nurses, use complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) far more than do workers in other fields, according to a new study. CAM includes diverse therapies outside the realm of conventional medicine. Overall, 76 percent of health care workers report CAM usage, compared with 63 percent of the general working population.

Health care workers use chiropractic treatment, massage and acupuncture for conditions that [conventional medicine](#) does not address well, said study co-author Lori Knutson, executive director of the Penny George Institute for Health and Healing with Allina Hospitals and Clinics in Minneapolis. While conventional providers often treat common issues such as [back pain](#) with [pain medication](#), holistic

providers address root causes, she said.

The researchers used data from the 2007 National [Health Interview Survey](#), analyzing responses from 14,329 working adults. Their findings appear online in the journal Health Services Research.

Among respondents, 1,280 worked in health care and fell into four categories: (1) providers including doctors and nurses; (2) technicians, for instance, sonographers; (3) support workers such as nursing assistants and (4) administrative personnel not providing patient care.

The study looked at practitioner-based CAM, such as [acupuncture](#); self-treatment with CAM, such as practicing Pilates; and any CAM usage such as following a [vegetarian diet](#), meditating and taking certain herbs.

Doctors and nurses had more than twice the odds of having used a practitioner-based CAM method during the prior year and nearly three times the use of self-treatment with CAM than support workers.

“As insiders, [health care workers](#) understand what’s missing in our medical system. They’re more educated than others about orthodox and [alternative medicine](#),” said Joya Lynn-Schoen, M.D., a psychiatrist by training who instead practices alternative medicine, offering patients homeopathy, nutrition and chelation therapies. “Mainstream medicine will say, ‘Here’s a pill’ or ‘Have an operation’ or ‘There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re just tired.’”

“We may be opening Pandora’s box by disclosing utilization of CAM by conventional providers,” Knutson said. “I prefer to believe that this will create an opening for both provider and patient in optimizing health for the whole person.” Knutson added that consumers ought to know that providers use CAM and that health care workers should know that their peers use CAM, although perhaps without discussing it.

How shocked consumers would actually be by their doctors' use of CAM is questionable, however. The researchers used a broad definition of CAM that includes practices as commonplace as deep breathing, meditation and massage, and ones as complex as biofeedback, hypnosis and chelation therapy, which involves administration of chemicals called chelating agents to eliminate heavy metals such as lead, arsenic or mercury from the body. To discover the depth of doctors' and nurses' involvement with the more esoteric approaches will require further research.

More information: Johnson PF, et al. Personal use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) by US healthcare workers. *Health Serv Res* online, 2011.

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